The Dalit I Define: Social Media and Individualized Activism in Subaltern Spheres

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Abstract

This paper discusses an explorative study of emerging Dalit activism in online realms. It is the aim of this study to provide empirical content to debates that link the advance of social media to shifts in citizenship and the manifestation of democracy. It seeks to unravel the complexity and hybrid appearance of online activism in practice by focussing on underexplored subaltern spheres. After some contextualizing reflections concerning literature on Dalit media and online political participation, it assesses attempts of prominent Dalit bloggers to employ social media in their battle for justice, representation and socio-economic mobility. Contributing to current debates on collective (and connective) action and 'new' or personalized politics – especially since Web 2.0 – the article stresses the importance of embracing a broad conceptualization of online political practice and the need to explore such practice as part of contemporary projects of self. It is argued that, in order to explore the dynamics of personalized politics within marginalized communities, one needs to assess the way in which the intertwinement of these individual projects of self and the collective emancipatory project appear in online social networking strategies of digital activists. As such, the analysis adds to the understanding of every day activism at grassroots level in the age of the Internet.

Keywords: Personalization of politics, social media, collective action, Dalits, subalternity, online activism, projects of self

Introduction

The uses that India's Dalits are making of the Internet suggests ways in which members of the exploited classes and their democracy-seeking allies may use the Internet to further the causes of democracy and equality of opportunity in every nation where a significantly subordinated minority is struggling to be recognized and understood (Thirumal and Tartakov, 2011:34)

The Dalits, also referred to as 'untouchables' or 'Scheduled Caste', comprise approximately seventeen percent of India's population of 1.2 billion (census 2011). Although benefitting from protective arrangements and affirmative action policies, they remain a socially stigmatized and economically marginalized group that is severely underrepresented in politics and media. This paper discusses an ongoing explorative investigation of emerging online Dalit activism. In particular, it focuses on the attempts of individual users to explore and exploit social media to battle Dalit deprivation, injustice and inequality. Adding to literature on 'new' politics (e.g. Dahlgren, 2006), collective/connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), and the ICT-driven personalization of politics (e.g. Bennett, 2012), the article stresses the need for an inclusive conceptualization of online political practice as well as the need for the analysis of such practice as part of contemporary projects of self. It offers empirical insights in subaltern political practices that help to further unravel the transformative force of social media, particularly its impact in the realm of everyday citizenship. The significance of these insights concern the way in which they direct us towards a complex conceptualization of contemporary activism; a depiction of online activism as highly idiosyncratic, profoundly dialogical, usually irregular (since situational and reactive), partially disembedded or deterritorialized, and clearly shaped by non-political components of the activists' subjectivities. After a sketch of Dalit media

and e-activism, and a concise review of some recent key analyses of political participation online, the crucial connection between personal endeavours and the Dalits' collective emancipatory project will be assessed. In specific, analysis indicates how individualized activism is deeply reflexive and shaped by personal biographies in which gender, mobility and education prove agenda-setting and profession determines the activist repertoire.

Mainstream and Dalit Media

Ever since the nascence of mass communication in India, Dalit presence in and impact on media – first print media and later also audio-visual media – has been severely restricted. A crucial reason for their absence in mainstream media is the domination of upper caste media. As Kumar and Subramani state, communication in India has been 'elite oriented' and 'monopolized' by the upper class (2014:125). In fact, they explain that Indian television, radio, cinema and newspapers do not tend to voice Dalit interests as these media are not just owned by members of the upper castes but are also produced by media professionals who virtually never belong to Scheduled Castes.

Because of such systemic exclusion, or at least severe underrepresentation, mainstream media have long been criticized by Dalit reformers for being manuwadi or casteist (Kumar and Subramani, 2014). Alternative Dalit media, predominantly magazines, were established in response. However, because of economic constraints and caste supremacy, the success of these Dalit outlets remained limited. Some authors claim that this situation is currently changing as a result of developments in ICT. More specifically, the emergence of 'new' media is presented as an opportunity for the establishment of indeed alternative and effective Dalit media. Nayar (2011) for instance argues that online spaces constitute an important new site for the

negotiation of subaltern identity and for practices and expressions of Dalit activism. Thirumal and Tartakov stress 'the Internet offers [Dalits] a terrain for exploitation of their community interests in social activism that is relatively casteless, nationally, and even internationally, extensive and so potentially useful in ways no previous medium has been before' (2011:28).

Despite such optimism, most authors agree that realization of this potential will take time. Although no extensive studies of new media practices among Dalits have been conducted, it is undeniable that access-challenges hamper online presence of Dalits across the subcontinent. According to Kumar and Subramani (2014), the limited media access of Dalits is the result of a combination of factors that range from shelter, economic livelihood and basic education to unemployment and lack of knowledge in English. As a result, they state, 'only a fraction of this vast and disenfranchised urban and rural community has little presence in the public sphere' (2014:127). Nevertheless, it is this small group of digital Dalits that offers illuminative insights and indicates the gradual inclusion of a marginalized population into circuits of information and communication (see Thirumal and Tartakov, 2011).

Mainstream and Dalit Media

Explorations of online Dalit activism generally focus on the web presence of Dalit organizations. The reason for this is undoubtedly their prominence in what has been referred to as Dalit cyberspace. As Thirumal and Tartakov (2011:26-27) observe, numerous websites and internet groups run by Dalit collectives and Dalit organizations have sprung up 'to engage in a vigorous questioning of the normative structure of Indian modernity'. Essentially, they argue, these sites and groups either focus on political recognition or (to a lesser extent) demand redistributive justice. Nayar (2011) adds that such collective Dalit e-

activism often includes an effort to construct an alternative history of India's anatomy of power. According to him, this effort implies a reframing of Dalit oppression from uniquely Indian to the Indian outcome of global tendencies that have produced (and produce) systems of exploitative domination across the world. More specifically, Nayar (2011:72) claims that the collective Dalit self-representation online becomes 'transnationalized by appealing to and fitting [itself] into a global historical narrative of oppression, torture and trauma'. The Internet thus allows Indian and diasporic Dalit activists to make their local quest into a 'transnational subaltern project' and link with foreign sympathizers, activists, NGOs, transnational organizations and with other 'histories of oppression' (Nayar, 2011). The response to the rape and killing of young Dalit girls in Uttar Pradesh (June 2014) on a private online initiative called Dalit Nation is illustrative:

> *Because the world stood with the civil rights movement in the United States and the anti/apartheid movement in South Africa, these movements succeeded. So too, we ask for the world to stand shoulder to shoulder with Dalit women and our families to end this violence. We do not fight only for ourselves* – DalitNation.com

Nayar assesses the political relevance of transnationalized e-activism by pointing at the formation of discursive constellations that he refers to as 'communities of interest'[1]: virtual collectivities composed of the vulnerable and the concerned. In similar vein, Kumar and Subrahami (2014) explain the rise of Dalit websites and blogs as proof of the emergence of an online (subaltern) counter-public. They mention the online discussion of current issues and incidents as an example. Debates over controversial films (e.g. *Aarakshan*) or for instance campaigning against atrocities such as those at Khairlanji or Navatan (see

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[1] E.g. https://twitter.com/AmbaAzaad/lists/dalit-bahujan-voices

Teltumbde, 2008; Rawat, 2009) enable the contemplation of not just caste but also media strategies, state policy and principles and practices of citizenship. Such perspective of course perfectly connects to the large body of literature on online social movements (see Hara and Huang, 2011), particularly those texts that focus on the Internet's impact on the public sphere and/or deliberative democracy. More specifically, it reflects the common understanding that the Internet 'most obviously makes a contribution to the public sphere' as it enabled the emergence of alternative or counter public spheres where 'political currents oppositional to the dominant mainstream can find support and expression' (Dahlgren, 2005:152). Also, literature on Dalit e-activism suggests that these alternative public spheres facilitate a kind of civic discussion or deliberation that is unprecedented and might (or will) prove an important catalyst of change.

Although important and illuminative, such analyses of public sphere and new principles and practices of democracy fall short of recognizing the empirical complexity of individual political participation. Most importantly, they seem to (a) overemphasize collectivity and (b) tend to assess political praxis in isolation rather than as an integral part of social behaviour at large. The community bias in texts on Dalit e-activism, possibly triggered by the authors' interests in web-sites rather than users, has even led some to conclude that online the collective trumps the individual. In the words of Nayar (2011: 73), the digital Dalit seeks communitarian and collective identities online, effacing the individual in favour of the group.' Preliminary findings in the project however contradict this observation. Rather than the simple embrace of togetherness and a de-prioritization of the individual self, the online conduct of the 'digital Dalits' in this study involves the contemplation and articulation of the 'I' at least as much as the portrayal of 'we' and the execution of collectivity.

As such, it is argued that a focus on the complex construction of this digital 'I' and the intertwinement of its political, cultural, religious and social constitution is crucial if one seeks to understand and explain contemporary subaltern political subjectivity and practice online. In line with recent work on the relation between digital media technologies and the individualization of collective action (e.g. Bennett, 2012) and literature on new social movements (e.g. Castells, 2010; Diani, 2000), the research thus explores the theme of personalized politics and assesses such politics as part and manifestation of reflexive identity projects of (for now) especially a small hypermobile and interconnected Dalit elite. An ethnographic person centred approach, tracing and closely scrutinizing individual conduct in context, was opted for to map and dissect their online presence.

Political Participation and the Internet

The assessment of emerging political practices and (subaltern) subjectivities online can be situated in an extensive and rapidly expanding body of literature on digital democracy and contemporary citizenship. Academic output concerning these themes – that is, analyses of the connection between the Internet and political participation – was coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Its analysis indicates literature generally revolves around two interrelated questions. The first question entails the particular manifestation of political practice online. The second question implies a contemplation of the newness of such practice. Or rather, it is about assessing the Internet as actual catalyst of change, a phenomenon that does not just facilitate innovation but is a transformative force itself.

The manifestation of political practice online is often depicted in terms of communicative action. According to Gil de Zúñiga et al (2010), considering the nature of the

Internet as an essentially discursive medium, political participation online is largely about political talk. Subsequently, a crucial contemplation concerns the potential of the Internet to promote (participatory) democracy by facilitating and inspiring collective deliberation (e.g. Asif, 2008; Papacharissi 2009). Empirical explorations of the manifestation of the Internet as such a democratizing device assess both the conditions for, and the implications of, use. In an analysis of the effects of the Internet on activism, Nam (2012) distinguishes three categories in the body of empirical work on spaces for political activity. The first category involves explorations of variations in access that produce inequalities in political participation (e.g. Min, 2010; Sylvester and McGlynn, 2010). The second category of literature focuses on the issues of power and public opinion. This category includes studies that contemplate the constitution of the online public sphere (or spheres) as either space that inspires alienated citizens to participate in politics (e.g. Davis, 2009; Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010) or space that reproduces existing patterns of participation and anatomies of power (e.g. Lunat, 2008; Salter, 2004). A related third and final category, according to Nam (2012), involves empirical examinations of the mobilization and reinforcement hypotheses. These are analyses that either stress the way in which the Internet helps to inform, inspire and activate non-participants (e.g. MacDonald and Tolbert, 2008), or serves as an expansion of the realm of political practice of those who were already involved and well-connected (e.g. Best and Kruger, 2005)

In an attempt to structure the abundance and variety of understandings of digital democracy, Dahlberg (2011) defines four 'digital democracy positions'. He refers to these positions as liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-publics, and autonomous Marxist. Their difference, according to Dahlberg (2011: 855), depends on the particular conceptualization of the political subject, the notion of democracy

that is promoted, and the assumed affordances of digital media technology. Essentially, academic contemplations concerning these three themes include a valuation of the revolutionary potential of the Internet and the revolutionary inclinations of its users. In other words, does the Internet – especially after the emergence of Web 2.0, alias the social web – trigger fundamental changes in political practice and political subjectivity?

Scholarship on the online manifestation of collective action tends to deal with exactly that question. Over a decade ago, Postmes and Brunsting already claimed the Internet indeed alters 'the nature of collective action and social movements' (2002: 300). In similar vein, more recently Harlow and Harp (2011: 211) conclude that social networking sites do not just enhance offline activism but also create 'new activism that would have not occurred had it not been for the Internet.' Such a new activism is assessed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) in their analysis of some examples of contemporary digitally enabled action networks (e.g. Put People First and los indignados). They recognize variations in large-scale action and explain these in terms of the underlying logic. According to Bennett and Segerberg, if you want to understand contemporary 'large-scale networks of contentious action', one should make a distinction between the logic of collective action and the logic of connective action. Whereas the former is rooted in the modern social order of hierarchical institutions and membership groups, the latter only surfaced in the late (or high or hyper) modern era in which formal organizations are losing their grip on individuals, and group ties are being replaced by fluid social networks. Contrary to constellations of collective action, connective action networks are subsequently considered "far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing or the levels of organizational resources required to respond effectively to

opportunities" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 750).

The crucial and straightforward argument of Bennett and Segerberg is that (a) online politics – in the form of the kind of activism this paper deals with – manifest in different ways because of a difference between collective and connective action, and (b) that fundamental differences in their logics make that instances of collective and connective action have to be analyzed on their own terms. Most important are differences in identity and choice processes. Collective action is organized on the basis of group membership, shared identity and joint ideology. It is characterized by the challenge of inspiring individuals to contribute to a collective endeavor that does not seem to hold immediate personal benefits (see Olson, 1965 on the free-rider problem). Connective action involves more personalized ideas and mechanisms for organizing action. Political practice, perspectives and increasingly flexible political identifications, shaped by connective logics, are expressions of individual aspirations, lifestyles and discontent. Contrary to collective action, Bennett and Segerberg argue that participation in connective quests is self-motivating. It depends on the individual's desire to share personally expressive content with one's contacts who, in turn, might feel inspired to repeat such sharing activities and distribute that (possibly altered) content among their contacts. The result can be action that resembles collective action in scale but is organized in a completely different fashion. Contemplating its organization, Bennett and Segerberg (2012:750) state that, 'connective action networks are typically far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing or the levels of organizational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities.' So, unlike collective action, connective action 'does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic

construction of a 'united we' (Ibid. 748). Instead, it entails a contribution to a common cause that can be read as an act of personal expression and recognition of self-validation (Ibid. 752).

This paper is an assessment of the empirical manifestation of such individualized (and technology driven) collective action. It can be gathered an exploration of what Bennett (2012) elsewhere refers to as the personalization of politics. According to him, such reflects a widespread disintegration of collectivity and the surfacing of 'individuation as the modal social condition [at least] in postindustrial democracies [and] particularly among younger generations' (Bennett, 2012: 22). Bennett seeks the origins of personalized politics in globalization and the spread of neoliberal ideology, especially its fundamental notions of personal freedom and deregulation. People have allegedly lost faith in politics-as-it-is and, Bennett argues, often operate as citizen-consumers mixing consumer practices – e.g. boycotting certain producers, opting for responsible brands and fair products – with political activities (see Beck, 2006; Stolle and Micheletti, 2012). Yet as the case of the digital Dalits shows, even when explicit indications of a consumer component are absent, activist practices narrate a person's lifestyle values, her or his socio-political biography, and the way in which she or he is positioned in society. Online, such personalized politics materialize as eclectic tracks of texts, stills, and for instance video fragments that (a) are created or forwarded (and adjusted) for the sake of a common good or joint battle, and (b) simultaneously serve to publicize bits and pieces of an engaged self. The depiction of Dalit activism below shows the complexity of such intertwinement of collective aspirations and individual inclinations, and indicates the importance of empirically scrutinizing personal (sub or hybrid) political practice in online realms. In line with Gerbaudo and Treré (2015), it shows that the situated construction and contemplation of identity, concerning both

the 'we' and the 'I' (as opposed to, part of, and designing the 'we'), defines the particular appearance of digital activists' conduct.

Digital Dalits

A modest number of Dalits was selected on the basis of their online prominence and activeness. Over a period of six months their interactions were observed and the content of their sites, blogs and accounts was assessed. The most well-known of these is the Indian poet, writer and activist KM. Her perspective on the political potential of social media transpires in her contribution to a newsletter called 'Links in the Chain'. Reflecting on her blogging motivation she writes:

> But, the democracy to speak up and speak out ensured that I was back to blogging again. Big media houses which own the major publications rarely give opportunity to Dalit (ex-untouchable) writers, and there's an absence of Dalit/anti-caste writers who write in English. The elitist writers want to write the feel-good stuff, India Shining myths, and that's the work that gets into print. So, I wanted to tap the power and enormous outreach of the internet: how anyone can write and be read/heard in the virtual space. I was not writing because anyone was commissioning me, I didn't have to follow other people's diktats, I could speak my mind. Google and tagging ensure that I can get heard without having my own column in any newspaper. Sometimes it helped me bring some happenings to light—such as the recent inside story of Dalit students being beaten up at a law university in Chennai (the mainstream media merely reported it as a "clash" at first) and so on. (2011:3)

KM's attempts to 'speak her mind' and to 'get heard' online is indicative of the kind of politics practiced by the digital Dalits in this study. There are some undeniable parallels in these politics and their practitioners. First of all, there is the issue of online presence. The online presence of digital Dalits is marked by rather strong fluctuations in frequency/ intensity and by a clear 'multi-sited' orientation. In other words, the kind and quantity of contributions varies from week to week –indicating their reactive (news about atrocities) and relatively spontaneous nature. The content and amount of posts is especially influenced by agenda setting offline events ranging from Father's Day to Dalit History Month and recent instances police brutality and racial tension in the United States. Furthermore individual media strategies encompass a variety of online platforms or social networking services. None of the digital Dalits solely uses Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram. Rather, they combine various platforms to maximize their reach and to fully exploit the particular advantages offered by the different services. One of the digital Dalits we have observed, the Indo-American activist ST, even calls herself a 'transmedia artist'. According to her Twitter account, she thus explores and exploits both 'new' media as well as 'traditional' media and 'uses song and narrative to tell the stories of marginalized communities in films/games/comics and more.' Such a hybrid approach characterizes the activism of all the Dalits in this explorative study. In fact, they all display a fairly comprehensive activism that also includes the establishment of thematic websites, the online publication of philosophical or scholarly contemplations, interviews in the mainstream online media (e.g. Al Jazeera, The Independent, The Guardian), and offline protests and awareness projects.

A second common denominator concerns the transnationalization of self-representation that was also mentioned by Nayar (see above). In fact, the posts and publications of digital Dalits indicate a broad focus on global marginality with the author's Dalitness sometimes reduced to merely an experiential frame of reference that can for

instance be subtly stressed to legitimize political claims and criticism. As such certain Facebook pages and Twitter accounts have developed into eclectic assemblages of scattered icons, ideas and images of revolutions and activisms. They are collages of pictures and quotes, personifications and fragments of wisdom that tie Indian reformer Dr. Ambedkar to universal symbols like Ernesto Guevara, Malcolm X and Rosa Luxemburg. Furthermore, although the emphasis might be on Dalit atrocities, these accounts are used to inform the social network about a variety of ills and errors, for instance by means of re-tweeting tweets on climate change, migrant deportation from the U.S., the future of Western democracy, Iranian death penalties, and the presence of ISIL in the U.K. Particularly prominent in the Dalit activist portfolios are the themes of racism and women's rights or gender. For instance, the racial unrest of 2014/15 across the United States frequently appears in digital contemplations and transmissions of all the activists, and so does feminism. A sense of commonality and identification with the plight of not-so-different marginalized others seems to inspire the prominence of these themes in the tracks of digital Dalits. Concerning the focus on racial discrimination, Tweets even speak of some sort of hashtag solidarity: '#dalithistory stands in solidarity with […] #baltimoreuprising. We will hold our tweets so that our followers can support them!' (Twitter, 28 May 2015) An equal care for caste is expected in return – true activism cannot be exclusive or unempathic. For instance, in an interview on an Indian blog, KM eloquently explains the inevitable intertwinement of caste and feminism:

> *I do not think you can call yourself a feminist from India if you maintain a studied silence about caste. Everything about the caste system–the roles it ascribes, the idea of marrying within the caste, the idea of arranged marriage, the idea of pollution, the idea of male*

superiority, the honor killings, the regimentation of the human body through rituals and observances, the exploitation of labor – everything runs counter to the idea of feminism. You cannot be a feminist who says "women are equal to men" without also fighting the inequalities of caste and class that make some women more superior to others. The fight against patriarchy is great, but given how integrated all struggles need to be, the hesitation in challenging caste, feudalism and capitalism has to go if we want to forge a strong feminism movement (17 February 2015).

Along with an indication of the ideal of solidarity, and illustration of Dalit activism as part of a global quest for justice and equality, such focus on gender also reveals a third and final parallel in the online behaviour of digital Dalits: the personalization of politics in a fashion that entails its broadened redefinition and allows the practice of e-activism to be (part of) reflexive projects of the self. More specifically, it hints the emergence of political practices that are idiosyncratic and reflections of political subjectivities shaped by the positioning of the individuals in social circuits, shaped by their lives in actual places, and shaped by the aggregate of events and experiences that define the biography of these activists and structure conduct (as an activist habitus). As such, the online output of the most active digital Dalits can be read as expressions of the 'I' defined by some sort of rooted cosmopolitanism in which mobility, global consciousness and ideational eclecticism amalgamate with contemplations of group and personal history and notions of home and belonging. The activism of the Britain-based Dalit academic VS is illustrative. His posts and tweets form a collage of clues about the way in which Sri Lankan (Tamil) roots, the inter-caste marriage of his parents, a childhood in a German refugee camp, and his existence as an engaged academic in the United Kingdom have determined his online activist orientation. Like the ones of

fellow Dalit activists, his quest for justice and equality is a highly reflexive endeavour in which VS shares inner struggles and seeks dialogical interaction with his readership. His frequent contemplations of the Tamil case and his Tamil identity clearly indicate the prominence of the 'I' and the formative force of its biography:

> *If you are 'Tamil' and told that 'you don't look Tamil', it's meant as a compliment that many have internalized to reproduce from within. Growing up, I've seen so many young Tamils hide their identities, calling themselves Malayalam, Mauritian or just plain Indian instead. I've done it at times too as a strategy to avoid anti-Tamil racism. But, as it goes with any form of oppression, when you narrate it to the perpetrating groups, they'll move to blanket denials and dismissal. Because, at the end of the day, we're all just a rainbow of 'desis', aren't we?*
> (Facebook, April 23, 2015)

The online publication of such self-reflections is more than merely an attempt of the author to contextualize his battle or to establish authority by proving a personal experience of marginality. Rather, it is a crucial part of a project of self-discovery in which media serve as fertile soil on which personal growth is attainable. In other words, online presence and conduct of Dalits can become part of a rather deliberate attempt to figure out oneself. A Facebook post in which VS retrospectively considers the personal impact of the online publication of an essay on the politicization of the personal – that is, an act of activism – shows how dialogical interaction with known and unknown others through the Internet is part of the project of self:

> *It's almost a year since this essay was published. In retrospect, I would rewrite some bits but it also stands testimony to a stage in my life. Ever since its publication, much has changed in life. From my brother subtly and provisionally identifying as Dalit to my father opening up more about my paternal grandparents*

to meeting dozens of other Dalits around the world and in virtual spaces. The latter has been one of the most encouraging, beautiful and inspiring things that have happened to me so far. Our family has changed in ways I'm still trying to understand after this publication. Our journey is far from over, the struggle is far from over. It's still deeply personal and intimate, but with the solidarity of others and sisters like KA and ST, the journey isn't a lonely one anymore. [emphasis added] (Facebook, 27 May 2015)

Reflexivity here entails communicative practice. It is a verbalization of the 'I' as activist or political subject that is defined by one's understanding of the affordances of technology, by impressions of social media users and use, and by certain key determinants of identity. Concerning the latter, most prominent among digital Dalits are gender, the diasporic experience and profession. Although it is too early to draw conclusions, the particular prominence of these, and the related overrepresentation of women, migrants and educated individuals in digital activist realms, appears to relate to urgency and distance. As women and/or (forced) migrants, the digital Dalits in this study face double or triple marginality. Their subordinate positioning as foreigner or female clearly connects to their experience of the dark side of casteism. And, as well-educated individuals and non-resident Indians, they enjoy the crucial reflexive distance necessary to critically perceive, contextualize and comment upon the Dalit question as 'insiders outside'.

The basis of activist repertoires of these insiders outside, and the most evident evidence of the highly idiosyncratic nature of online activism, is profession. Digital Dalits are writer, artist, or academic whose transformative instrumentaria and reflexive contemplations are clearly products of a specific professional existence. ST's focus on song and storytelling is illustrative. In a YouTube clip the 'transmedia artist' explains how 'story-song' is her way of

simultaneously letting the world know – 'claim your own place with the rest of humanity – and to 'emotively ground' unbelievable injustice; a strategy to make sense and give a voice to the marginalized that suits her personal artistic constitution and is, according to ST, inspired by the story-telling 'tradition in the untouchable communities'. Another illuminative example is a Facebook post by VS. In fact, this post shows a fundamental struggle of representation the insider outside faces after her of his (partial) escape from marginality:

> *Ever since entering academia, there's been plenty of occasions where people have pointed out that 'people like me' are removed from "real-life" experiences. It always felt strange of an accusation to encounter and then respond to without erasing my own recognition of my privilege of being in this space. It is, however, equally difficult to silence and negate our lives as children of cleaners, cooks, factory workers, taxi drivers or maids, whose past and origin isn't erased by fact of simply entering academia.*

> *What does "real life" really mean when many of us are still affected by the poor, working-class, racialized, caste-marked and refugee positionalities that have marked our lives and continue to limit our choices in the future? It reminds me of one of my female cousins who, while studying law, returned 150 km home every other weekend to help her then 64-year-old mother clean the elementary school that she used to attend as a child. Today, she is training to become a state attorney. We'll soon encounter her as a success story while more or less erasing or romanticizing the struggles that have brought her where she is today and will be tomorrow. These stories are common among many of us, who have learnt to survive with little and silence the difficulties we encounter as life for the prospects of a better tomorrow.*

> *The "real life" never stopped to affect or concern people like us once we enter academia. It constantly informs and subjects us to negotiations that not all of us are forced to undertake equally and that not all of us feel comfortable sharing. The binary that many people draw, or like to project on us to exclude or dismiss our voices, are clearly ignoring the reality and complexities of our lives, past and present. While "Westerners" still romanticize the writer who is also a dishwasher, this has been our reality all along and continuous to be our present. We're in the academy despite being poor, working class, lower caste, racialized and refugees and return to lives that contradict the dichotomies others impose on us.* (Facebook, 25 May 2015)

Essentially this is a dilemma of spokesmanship; it is about the question whether a Dalit who is equipped to publicize is actually a model and source of inspiration or a figure that is de-marginalized (because of knowledge, connectedness and mobility) to the extent that she or he can no longer adequately express the experience of subalternity. Ultimately, VS´ reflections thus indicate a core complication of personalized politics in subaltern spheres. They expose the potentially problematic intersection of individuality and collectivity and invite to further scrutinize the question how connective action in its particularly personalized form can indeed have a collective impact.

Conclusion

The online conduct and contemplations of digital Dalits show the kind of intertwinement of (self-)identity and activism that is mentioned in recent work on Internet and politics. Especially the linkage between reflections on life at large (and the situated self) and individual political practice is illuminative. It reflects the observation that 'individuals increasingly code their personal politics through personal lifestyle values'

(Bennett, 2012:22) and provides crucial insights in the way 'new politics' (Dahlgren, 2005, 2009) are explored and executed in currently understudied marginalized communities.

Following Bennett and Segerberg (2012), digital Dalit activism can be considered an example of connective action, an individualized type of collective action characterized by personalized ideas and practices, flexible identifications – composed around (customized) core notions of Dalitness – and its self-motivating potential. The analysis of online tracks of digital Dalits revealed three defining tendencies. First of all, online activism is variable and easy to adjust. It appears to be rather spontaneous at times and is usually reactively responding to agenda-setting events and incidents. The prominence of news stories in Tweets, Facebook posts and other Dalit output is illustrative. The second tendency concerns the complex appearance of activism. Digital Dalits always use various podia or social networking services. Also, they blend political commentary with non-political talk and address the issue of marginality and social injustice in the case of Dalits as well as marginal others. Their activism materializes as a creative combination of original content and recycled contemplations and images of fellow Dalits and global icons of political struggle. The third and final trend involves the actual individualization of activism. The particular way in which digital Dalits create and publicize, or select and share, impressions and information, is heavily influenced by the 'I'. More specifically, Dalit online activism encompasses a project of self in which reflexivity is crucial and of a distinct (dialogical or communicative) kind. Hence, the struggle for equality and justice is simultaneously an attempt to discover oneself. This attempt implies continuous interaction with both the media and its users. Furthermore, data suggest that especially gender, migration or transnationalism and education/profession are important

ingredients of the identity and identifications of digital Dalits. It has been suggested that this has to do with both urgency and distance; the activist stance of Dalits is influenced by the experience of double/multiple marginality and by the experience of being an insider outside because of migration, education or whatever kind of untypical socio-economic mobility.

All in all, this explorative study of the appearance of new/personalized politics in subaltern spheres provides insight in the articulation of the self in contemporary online activist quests. Building on previous work (de Kruijf, 2014) as well as recent literature on collective action, this implied an assessment of the nexus between 'life politics' as the politics of lifestyle of digital Dalits concerned with self-actualization in post-traditional contexts, and 'emancipatory politics' as the politics of life changes meant to improve conditions for the massive collective of subalterns with whom the digital Dalits identify (see Giddens 1991). Of course, considering the explorative nature and early stage of the project, this article narrates the first fruits of work in progress. It is an assessment of the online conduct of a limited (yet highly diverse) group of activists that consists of unusually privileged Dalits. For instance, the connection between these activists and the Dalit masses across India has not yet been explored. Also, it focuses on unorganized social media activism and does not consider the involvement of individuals in collective (online) efforts (e.g. Dalit Freedom Network, IDSN). Further research could include an exploration of these connections. Most important, however, is to pursue a deeper understanding of the intertwinement of personal practice and collective action. In order to further scrutinize this intertwinement, a multifaceted conceptual approach is required in which (dialogical) theories of self/identity are combined with contemplations of the online organization and mobilization of discontent. Along with such an approach, more rigorous ethnographic – particularly offline –

research is needed to contextualize online conduct and explore and explain the primary ingredients of individual recipes for change. Ultimately, such research should thus lead towards a perspective on e-activism that moves beyond attempts to grade its similarity or dissimilarity to conventional activisms and that allows dissection of the Dalit case as an indication of everyday citizenship; an emerging people's politics marked by the complex yet productive intertwinement of the public and the personal.

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